

THE LIBERATION OF PREACHING  
AND  
THE PREACHING OF LIBERATION

by  
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A professional project  
presented to the faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont  
in partial fulfillment  
for the degree  
Doctor of Ministry  
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*This professional project, completed by*

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**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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## ABSTRACT

This project is divided into two parts. The first part--The Liberation of Preaching--deals mainly with the need to liberate preaching from extra biblical authorities, misunderstood concepts of interpretation, traditional exegesis and conventional homiletics in order to have the freedom to proclaim the biblical message of liberation.

The second part of the project explores the basis, background and preaching values of liberation theology in Latin America, dealing with the need to develop a hermeneutical system more faithful to God and to His Word and more faithful to the concreteness of history and the realities of societal backgrounds.

The conclusion is the author's theological perspective of preaching, which emphasizes the importance for the preacher, particularly in Latin America, to stand out against compliancy in theological integrity, preconceived ideas in biblical interpretation and conventionality in social practices in order to remain open to the needed changes, challenges and reinterpretations to be more faithful to the witness of the gospel in a changing world.

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Addressed by the Project

This project deals with the problem of the task of biblical preaching in the process of liberation, or what it means to preach liberation from the biblical point of view. The particular context to be explored is Latin America with the many challenges for theologians, pastors and preachers in general in this time of history. The particular concern is the pulpit in Latin America, that is, the need to proclaim human liberation, equality, and justice with biblical authority.

#### Importance of the Problem

A word is in order as to the writer's personal attitude toward the Bible and toward preaching. Continued use and study of the Bible in the pulpit, in the classroom and for personal purposes has produced a deep conviction about its place in the faith and life of the Christian community. The Bible is the unique and unrepeatable record of God's purpose and will to establish on earth a society of redeemed people, dedicated to their Saviour and viewing one another with love. The Bible contains both the word of this purpose and the manner of its communication and



accomplishment. For this reason the Bible is essential to salvation.

To announce the Word which God has made known and which is recorded in Scripture is still the outstanding obligation of the person of God. Skills in many areas of ministry, psychological and sociological insights, priestly proficiency, educational effectiveness and many other aids are extremely valuable for ministers and preachers. Yet, without the effective proclamation of the divine Word, they may become useless and even totally irrelevant to the preacher's task, especially in the Latin American context.

It will be enough to point out here that the very nature of the Christian Gospel, of which the Church is both product and custodian, centers in the Good News of redemption. The proclamation of these Good News is therefore indispensable before anything can happen in the area of liberation. Through the report of the wonderful deeds of God the Church came into being. When people heard the News which culminated in the event of Christ, it was ratified by the Spirit in their own hearts. They became new creatures, filled with power and hope. The activity of the Spirit enabled them to accept the Word of their Salvation. These early Christians let this Word penetrate and permeate every dimension of their existence with cleansing and vivifying power. To preach the Word was, and is, the paramount demand upon ministers of Jesus Christ. For this there is

still no substitute unless one rejects the essence of the Gospel itself.

### Thesis

I believe that a sermon can and should deal with contemporary theological and social issues. One of the major vehicles the pastor has for giving a theology to the people is congregational worship, specifically the sermon. While the world is awakening to the need of human liberation, freedom, equality, and justice, ministers in Latin America have become increasingly aware of oppression as the fundamental condition to which preaching must be addressed. My thesis is that true liberation preaching must be biblical preaching. Yet for preaching to be truly biblical it must be liberated from certain "bondages", mainly in the areas of interpretation and proclamation.

### Scope and Limitations of the Project

I intend to divide the project into two parts. The first part--the liberation of preaching--will deal mainly with my understanding of biblical preaching. For me, a biblical sermon must do two things: (1) It seriously and creatively engages Scripture in its own setting, frequently revealing fresh, new dimensions of its reality so that we may enter into its life as we may never have done--certainly not recently. (2) It actively engages our modern community

life at the precise point where the passage of Scripture so vitally addresses us that it almost seems to have been written especially for us, here and now, not merely for all people in all times and places. This shows the importance of both freshness and particularity. Both are foundational resting in two assumptions: (1) The Bible is not finished speaking; it has more to say than has been said and understood by all, more perhaps, than has recently been heard by any. (2) The word it wishes to speak in preaching is not universal, abstract, timeless, objective truth; but particular, concrete, specific, timely, subjective revelation for our current condition and our present task.

In biblical preaching the problem is not with what we want to do, it is with how we go about doing it thus, the title "The Liberation of Preaching". I will suggest four general observations about biblical preaching which constitute problems and the possibility of being liberated from those problems:

(1) Scripture is not doing much speaking; other things are speaking, dictating, controlling, enlightening the sermons and the congregations. (2) Interpretation is badly understood and used, particularly when prefaced by the adjective "creative". Creative interpretation does not mean new diction, and appropriation, new speaking of the old, familiar word; it means sensitive listening, openness to more. Interpretation is hearing, before it can be

speaking. (3) Traditional exegesis and conventional application stand between us and the text, inhibit and prejudice our encounter with it, and predetermine the outcome of our work. (4) Our homiletic is in our way. The way we prepare and deliver sermons, our reasons for preaching them, the procedures we follow and the materials we use; all this gets between us and the text and disturbs our work. We need to loosen up homiletical assumptions and activities and be taught by the text. I will not consider those four directly and in order; rather, I will try to support them as conclusions by looking at what happens in sermons, what is wrong with sermons that which makes them "unbiblical" in my definition, and how we can experience liberation from the different bondages and remain faithful to the message of the Bible in order to proclaim liberation.

The second part of the work--the preaching of liberation--will explore further the basis and background of liberation theology, mainly from the Latin American perspective in order to sharpen our vision of the current context in which preaching is done. For that discussion I will be relying mainly on the original works of Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Jose Miguez Bonino, Seberino Croato, and others. I will present my own perspective regarding the biblical message of liberation and how it should be proclaimed in the Latin American context, following the criteria that:

(1) We need to put ourselves before the global fact of the revelation of God in all the Bible, (2) that we must study the problem of liberation in the light of the Bible without mutilating the testimony of Scripture, either by reducing it to schematic texts or to passages that do not touch on the problem, (3) to put ourselves in a position of solidarity with the sufferings, concerns and hopes of the people as a condition or prerequisite to the understanding of Scripture and a prerequisite to effective proclamation of the message of liberation.

This project will integrate the disciplines of theology and preaching. Actually, both subjects, theology and preaching, relate to both the theoretical and the practical disciplines. The method used in this project is largely library research, personal experience, and personal reflection.

PART ONE

THE LIBERATION OF PREACHING

## Chapter II

### THE NEED TO LIBERATE PREACHING FROM EXTRA-BIBLICAL AUTHORITIES

My thesis, as stated earlier, is that true liberation preaching must be biblical preaching. Speaking about the challenge of biblical preaching William D. Thompson says:

The closing decades of the twentieth century cry for preaching that is genuinely biblical. The constant threat of nuclear war, the rising number of broken families, and the bewildering dilemmas occasioned by technology combine with a thousand other contemporary problems to demand a word from pulpits that can be heard as an authentic word from the God who reveals himself in the pages of the Scriptures. Preaching that is unbiblical or marginally biblical will not do.<sup>1</sup>

Many sermons fail to be genuinely biblical because the authority in which they rest, the acknowledged authority they evoke in the minds of the hearers, is extra-biblical, i.e., authorities other than the text. Such preaching may be quite Christian and sound in doctrine. It is also creatively relevant, sensitive and imaginative in the interpretation of our situation. In much preaching, we hearers are clearly addressed here where we live; specific modern

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<sup>1</sup>William D. Thompson, Preaching Biblically (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 9.

attitudes and actions are explicated, current issues and options well drawn; the claim of the gospel is heard. We cannot escape personal and societal involvement and struggle with genuinely important realities of immediate and urgent appeal, but the authority of that sermon which involved and claimed us was not biblical authority. The sermon had veracity and compelling power; it made us resolve to do and die, but not because we were claimed by the authority of the text and the ancient realities it records.

The reason is clear to see. The bible, the text, played an insignificant role in the sermon. There was no continuing rich encounter with the text, no persistently significant traffic between the bible and the sermon. To begin with there was no vital entry into the ancient situation, no identification with and experience of its reality by which the text could also have uncovered and identified the nature of our own situation, revealed and explained and given direction to us. In short, we had no chance to be claimed by the texts' relevant authenticity and authority. The preacher simply did not evoke biblical authority, didn't even attempt to do so. The preacher assumed that the text is authoritative, read it, took a proper "theme" from it, and then got down to the serious business of "applying" it. In so doing, he adduced other authorities to such an extent that the text had little or no chance to exercise its authority. This is not to vilify the preacher; it is



simply to analyze what one does because that's the way one goes about doing sermons.

#### A CASE STUDY

The text was read from I Chronicles 21 concerning David's refusal to accept Ornan's threshing floor as a gift to be used in making a sacrifice. It highlighted David's speech, "I will not give as an offering to the Lord something . . . that costs me nothing." The sermon had a clear and single theme: "Costly, sacrificial worship is more genuine than cheap." In three clearly marked points, it spoke of Public Worship, Practical Worship, and Private Worship. Using good materials appropriate to each and clearly relevant to us, it developed each point. Public worship was divided into components of the service (praise, prayer, attention to the word, etc.). Practical worship, worshipping God through service to mankind, was well developed with genuinely important service concerns. Private worship, or devotion, was considered, using excellent literary excerpts. Further, as subdivision, each point was clearly split in a contrast of easy, cheap, merely conventional worship and deeply dedicated, genuinely costly, sacrificial worship. The brief outline here is quite incapable of representing the vitality of the sermon. It evoked an excellent response. Hearing it, we resolved to enter into worship and service more seriously because we had acknow-

ledged our shallowness and conventionality. It was a good sermon, serving worthy ends, and doing so effectively. It was not a biblical sermon, though it was intended to be one, and listeners may have thought it was one.

It was not biblical because the bible wasn't heard and had no chance to exert its authority. We were not claimed by the urgent reality of the ancient event because we didn't witness it; it never happened. We didn't learn of David the man, the king. We didn't understand how this event fit into his life or how his desire to sacrifice arose, whether it was an ordinary usual one, an act of special piety, or a petition for God's favor in a particular situation. We heard nothing about how he knew costly sacrifice was desired, whether he knew anything about cheap sacrifice or was tempted to make one here. It was not mentioned that the chance of cheap sacrifice was not his idea, but merely fortuitious circumstance, not the result of David's selfishness; nothing of why Ornan made the offer and what he hoped to accomplish by it or how David's response related to that. That is, we heard none of the detailed dimensions of the biblical event recorded for us, which could have provided vital entry into its dramatic portrayal of human events--perhaps like the events of our own lives. David, in the sermon, was not a real human with a real history, living through a real event, confronted by real options furnished by real relationships. He was only

a quickly named "hero" said in the briefest possible way to have done the "virtuous" thing. Because David and the event recorded in the text were not seen by us to be real, they could not really exercise any authoritative claim upon us.

The preacher had reduced the text to a theme: "costly is superior to cheap." Now, eschewing all the rich detail of the text, the preacher had to get down to the business of detailing what this theme means to us, and that detail was drawn from various modern and traditional authorities, with the result that the setting and content of the sermon were exclusively worship life in the modern Christian church as it ministers to the world. The authority it exercised over its hearers was based in that same setting and content, not in the text: the scripture.

Now, there is nothing wrong with preaching evoking other authorities with which to support its biblically-derived insight and counsel. Scripture writers, themselves, use various arguments in addition to recourse to the sacred writings. Preaching would be impoverished, foolishly obscurantist, and even world-denying if it didn't use all kinds of materials and procedures to aid us in understanding and experiencing biblical truth, but in the biblical sermon, by definition, the central and functionally effective

epistemological ground is scripture<sup>2</sup> - normally a specific pericope whose vital dynamic claim upon us is the central business of the sermon.

What other authorities are likely to loom large in sermons, supplanting the authority of the text's witness?

#### THEOLOGICAL PROPOSITION (THEME)

The thing most likely to be interposed between us and the text, the development of which calls in other authorities in addition to itself, is theological proposition, usually in the form of a sermon "theme". Such a theme is, of course, assumed to have once been derived from scripture; or it may be known by the preacher to have been derived from his text because he derived it or is following others who have done so. However, in the sermon it is not seen to be derived from the text; it just stands, tacitly assumed to be both true and biblical, and, therefore, the proper basis for the sermon. The fact that the congregation readily agrees that the theme is true and biblical doesn't mitigate the situation; it only exacerbates it; for they, too, are confusing the authority of theological construct with biblical authority.

To be specific, in the sermon about David's sacrifice, the theme "costly is better than cheap" was really

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

not shown to arise from, to have been true in David's experience (we learned nothing from his experience because we didn't encounter it). The theme, which was of course the real text of the sermon and determined its content and shape and mood, etc., had only the authority of our having already granted that it's a Christian teaching, a proper theological construct, an accepted bit of traditional Christian wisdom. The proof of that is in the fact that the theme and much of the sermon could just as well have been based in other texts, such, for instance, as the widow's mite, which could be said to support the same theme.

Reducing a pericope to a theological or moral proposition, a theme, is never sufficient to evoke the authority of the biblical witness of that pericope. The more obviously true, the more general and aphoristic that theme or proposition may be, the more likely it is that it simply stands on its own authority and gathers other authorities to its case and leaves the biblical authority of the text untapped.

When preaching follows this well-worn path, the preacher soon loses sight of the distinction between the text and the traditional Christian dictum.

Such theological dicta circulating about the Christian community have a variety of origins and standings. They may rest in the historic creed or confession of the preachers' church or church family, or they may be part of

the general heritage of theological constructs long shared by the church as a whole, but actually, historically the thought of one of the great theologians of the church, or one of its councils. One's prime authority, then, is really Augustine, Aquinas, Nicea, Church tradition, or some modern theological position. The source of the theme of the sermon may be church piety and practice. Consider such things as the mourner's bench, praying, private confession to a priest, penance, the presence (real or symbolic) of Christ in the eucharist, the practice of baptism and confirmation, stewardship calls for the every member canvass, or "Christian" holidays such as Thanksgiving and Mother's Day. These are often preached with various biblical material used as "texts", but their genesis in scripture is quite problematic. It can be argued, of course, that the ultimate authority behind such ideas is consonant with the intention of scripture, and that this justifies them.<sup>3</sup> But consistent preaching in this manner soon makes biblical illiterates of people, who never really encounter in depth anything of the source book of the faith (only getting its so-called intention in second-hand theological formulation). It can also impoverish the preacher who never seriously studies scripture, being content with secondary comment about what it means.

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<sup>3</sup>James Earl Massey, Designing the Sermon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 66.

## EMPIRICAL-RATIONAL METHODOLOGY

Theological propositions can stand between us and the text, and constitute the central authority claim made by the sermon, as well as gather to themselves other materials than scripture to support their claims. A source for the latter materials constitutes a second epistemological basis, in which the actual authority of much preaching is grounded. I refer to rational-empirical method and data. We have no intention of calling for irrational or non-rational preaching, or for eliminating the witness of human experience from preaching. But it is one thing to seek insight and guidance from scripture (asking later whether experience and reason agree) and quite another to find one's basic ideas in humanistic disciplines, and then pitch in a few bible verses to baptize them. The latter often happens. Let me illustrate. Dealing with personal loneliness, anxiety, and guilt, it is often the authority of the psychologists and counselors which explains the situation and prescribes the therapy, both curative and preventative. If it is the evil of oppression in the world, poverty, and societal pressures, the politicians and sociologists, even cultural anthropologists, are the source of authoritative understanding and guidance.

These illustrations may suggest that choice of "in" subject matter is what determines which rational-empirical

authorities dominate the sermon, but this is not necessarily so. Patently "religious" subjects, such as sin and forgiveness, are often addressed more with empirical and rational insights than biblical ones, whether by an evangelist whose string of conversion stories of people saved by his preaching is primarily an empirical proof - or by a devotee of positive thinking (or possibility thinking) whose claim rests similarly in documented human experience. When we are claimed by the authority of such preaching, it is not Scripture which has exercised the major pull on our lives, it is rational, empirical authority.

It is the burden of all preaching, including biblical sermons, to present the faith as rationally and with as much empirically based validity as possible, without eclipsing biblical authority. When the appeals to reason and experience so predominate as to obscure the biblical claim, we simply no longer have a biblical sermon, although its ideas may be Christian.

#### OTHER AUTHORITIES

A variety of other authority claims may be functional in preaching, and may be evoked to such a degree as to eclipse biblical authority claims. It could be argued that these are variations of the already mentioned theological, and rational - empirical impulses, but we choose to point to them separately.



1. Respected literature other than the bible has long been employed in Christian preaching, and, on occasion, it has supplanted scripture as the principle source of knowledge and wisdom.

Recent experimental homiletics has had a fling at the notion that the authority of literature is to be valued so highly that it has actually taken as its text a modern play or novel, drawing from it the bulk of both ideas and materials for the sermon, hoping the novel to say what people apparently will not hear from Scripture.<sup>4</sup> It has even been suggested that not only preaching but even theology, really is story-telling.

We need literate preaching, but if the power to persuade us rests primarily and pervasively on the power of story, or on literary aesthetic grounds, we do not have a biblical sermon, although it may be Christian.

2. Concern for "relevance" is another authority claim which can rush to the foreground of the sermon and upstage the Bible. Again, as elsewhere, I hasten to qualify here that I do not counsel irrelevant, obscurantist, antiquarian concentration on only the ancient event and its meaning. However, an over-zealous desire to "tell it like it is", to address honestly the way things really are, can

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<sup>4</sup>George E. Sweazey, Preaching the Good News (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 186.

result in obscuring or even totally overlooking the claims of scripture. Modern literature might serve as a kind of paradigm of this expected relevance for its ruthless, militant honesty in bluntly acknowledging as art all of the human condition, per se. While such literature can be admired as "relevant" by some, one cannot help noting that it seldom asserts, undergirds, establishes, or explains life's meaning. It simply depicts, portrays, exposes what's there with Cartesian simplicity. This exists; therefore it is as real as anything else which exists.

There is today a kind of cult of immediacy and subjectivity - it owes much to the modern existentialist temper - which at its worst simply deems most important and most authoritative whatever most concerns us in the present. It often rejects setting us in a larger context of reality beyond ourselves and our moment in time. This outlook tends to define as relevance what is often mere fadism. Nothing is more irrelevant today than what was relevant only yesterday. Professor Cornish Rogers emphasizes that relevance in preaching is more than "telling it like it is". It is the relationship between the way things really are and an objective authority which counsels how things ought to be, or are meant to be, or what they are striving to become, or what they really are beneath the appearances of the surface. That is, relevance is bipolar; but the cult of relevance is short on establishing the objective pole.

It assumes its self-evident truth and plunges into the foreground, into the subjective and immediate.<sup>5</sup> Of course, biblical preaching will be "relevant" because searching encounter with scripture and our sensitivity to life around us has shown us the true shape of our predicament in the perspective of God's word. Both poles are required. If the appeal of the sermon is based primarily in the fact that the subject genuinely matters to us, it may be a "relevant" sermon, but it will lack biblical authority.

I have shown these several sources of authority claim as if, in sermons, one tended to chose one or the other and, in the process, eclipse the authority of scripture. Actually, the situation is worse than that. What we often do is to use all of these authorities in varying amounts in a single sermon and the scripture is left untouched.

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<sup>5</sup>Notes taken at a lecture by Cornish Rogers on "Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation", School of Theology at Claremont, October, 1982.

### Chapter III

#### THE NEED TO LIBERATE PREACHING FROM CONVENTIONAL HOMILETICS

Another thing which makes preaching unbiblical, even when we try to do biblical sermons, is our misunderstanding and misuse of what is called both "interpretation" and "application". It is regularly assumed that the text is one thing and the sermon (or other interpretation) is another. The former calls for exegesis to understand it in its own time and place; the latter calls for creative application of its teaching to our time and place. That seems innocent enough; but the problem with it is that in practice, it means exegesis has already been done, and the preacher's task is application or interpretation, period.

Therefore, the preacher's functional question facing the text, is "How can I get this message across?" "How can I make it more real, more persuasive". And so we pay little heed to the text, assuming, of course, that we already know what it has to say, particularly with familiar pericopes, and our task is to find interesting and effective ways of saying it. We search modern language and images and experience, try different literary genres - dialogue, story, drama, buzz sessions of structured feedback - employing materials and methods from everywhere (except from the text).

I want to urge that this kind of creative effort is misplaced and often employed too soon in the sermon-building process. Of course, preaching ought to make use of all our creativity to bring the message to bear on modern life. It ought to utilize modern language, images and materials, even varying literary genres and communication methods. But in biblical sermons we first have another and more basic task, and that is hearing the text. The prior question when we face the text is not, "How can I say better what's in the pericope?", but "How can we hear from this text a word so fit for our situation, so productive of its intention toward us, that we might be forgiven for not having heard it before?"<sup>1</sup>

Revelation, apokalyptein, means "uncovering or disclosure of the hidden". If scripture, and preaching from scripture, are to be revelatory, they will not do so by repetition of the familiar, accepted, traditional - they will uncover, disclose, reveal what we have not seen and heard and known fully. That means that creative interpretation means listening to the pericope as if we'd never heard it before, instead of assuming that we already know what its lesson is. Even when it's there at the top of the page,

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<sup>1</sup>James Daane, Preaching with Confidence (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 50.

where Bible editors have put it for centuries, the traditional popular exegesis, and 10,000 sermons which have neatly capsuled it, are not authoritative.

Creative interpretation is not understood primarily in terms of the form, manner, procedure of the sermon. The sermon may move deductively from assumed truth to particular implications, or move inductively from observed particulars to the uncovering and acknowledging of a truth. It may be composed of logical argumentation or descriptive narrative. It may have three clear and memorable points marching to an irrefutable conclusion, or move loosely through its materials and culminate in an open-ended provocative suggestion. It may be a monologue or dialogue, adopt a paternal, superior, prescriptively coercive stance toward its listeners, or articulate the listener's own inner state and struggles in the context of the gospel. It may, or may not, tap the resources of literature, art, the media.

That the above matters involve creativity of a kind vital to preaching is readily acknowledged, but they are not the primary kind of creativity addressed here. The form, stance, manner, and supporting materials of the sermon should have creative attention further down the trail; the job of creative interpretation of the text is basically hearing what else the text has to say, when most church

folks think they already know what it means.<sup>2</sup>

The text's authoritative address is not clear and automatic in our recognition of the current meanings of the words and sentences into which it's been translated, nor for that matter in our understanding of the biblical language text. Least of all is it contained in the traditional things which popular piety and preaching have said about the lesson the text teaches. I want to locate the problematic for creative interpretation just at the point of the text's address to us, not at the point of our address of the text's supposedly clear meaning to our congregations. It is my conviction that the latter has crowded out the former; that we have accepted the part for the whole. We've forgotten that the basic reason for creative interpretation is that the literal text may not be effectual when simply read (even by us professionals), may not be effectual when simply conventionally and traditionally interpreted. Forgetting that, we have turned our labors toward a merely "instrumental" creativity, with which to address to our congregation what we assume we clearly and fully understand. The question of this instrumental creativity is "How can I say what's in that text in a more productive way?" But primary, basic creativity calls

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<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Achtemeier, Creative Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 55.

us back to the question, "How can we hear more from that text than we already know?"<sup>3</sup>

Imaginative "use" of a text's already accepted meaning and intention in order to reach certain goals in our congregations is one thing; it can be a very creative activity, but it is "instrumental" creativity. I want to call for the more basic creativity which in this project denotes the appearance of the new.

The new in creative interpretation is not new methods and vehicles and materials used as instruments to convey traditional content. It means new dimensions of the text's rich reality and new objects of its address in our lives. Such newness results in sermonic interpretation of such pointed specificity that the text seems almost uniquely addressed to us, in particular, not simply to everyone in all times and places. If it be suggested that I am simply calling for better exegesis, and that we cannot be expected to do the exegetes' work for them, I reject the implied separation of labor and the limitation of homiletics to mere matters of organization and delivery.

Look again at our example sermon: David's refusal to use gift materials for making a sacrifice, insisting that he must pay, was used to talk about cheap and costly worship; simply assuming that worship is a modern equivalent

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 56.



of sacrifice, because other preachers have done that and it has become conventional. The preacher didn't listen to the text, anymore, or even to common knowledge of ancient matters. The text, if heeded, would have told us there's nothing like regular Sunday worship there in David's experience. It is not going to the temple on Sabbath or for festival, but, rather, is a desperate, special effort to atone for a great sin. The text would have told us there is nothing there about serving other people as worship of God; David is trying to persuade God not to punish the people for what he did. The text, if heeded, would have shown us there's nothing in David's experience there about personal devotions. His actions, as the King, cannot be merely personal. The effects are so automatically public that they spill over into others who are innocent. David's action is clearly a desperate attempt to atone for his sin, so God will stop punishing Israel. Our common sense tells us that if we, like David, are trying to atone for a great sin (incidentally, the sermon never considered that such ought to be the case) we don't do it nowadays by making a sacrifice, i.e., in public worship, or by compassionate concern for the needy. (The sermon also never considered that the suffering of others, which is appropriate to such a sermon, is that suffering which is, as in David's case, the result of our sin!)

No, the preacher did no creative listening to the text. The preacher used creativity instrumentally to develop and apply a lesson, a theme, which we already knew was true. It was assumed, perhaps because others had assumed it, that this text supported that theme. The result was an excellent argument for ideas, at best only adjacent to what the text is doing, and, at worst, in some ways, even contrary to it. What the people learned on that day was not what the pericope intended, although it certainly wasn't done purposely.

When we set to work as this preacher did, assuming we already have the essence of the text in hand - the theme which tradition has indicated - and exercise our creativity to develop and apply it to our present situation, our Homiletics takes over and further deafens and blinds us to the text. Let's try to be more specific.

The theme the preacher assumes is a distillation of the text's witness and intention is, "Costly worship is superior to cheap, merely formal worship." The generality and the aphoristic character of the theme serve to aggravate the tendency to pay little further attention to the text and develop the sermon out of adjacent modern realities, which come to us by free association and imagination. A theme so inclusive as to be almost universal, and so aphoristically appealing as to make critical analysis appear almost indecent, is quite liable to two errors. It

easily forgets the detailed richness of the text it had hoped to contain and summarize, and it risks, in its drive toward a universally true pronouncement, missing the specific truth-claim made in the text. We have already shown that the sample sermon missed much of the rich detail in the text. It also missed seeing the truth which David did experience.

Sermon themes which are aphoristic generalizations applicable to all sorts of people and situations are very likely to be informed by all sorts of people and situations, not by the text. A theme like "Honesty is the best policy" or "God forgives penitent sinners" can lead anywhere away from its text. One like "Confessing one's lust after a neighbor's wife is more righteous than joining the army to escape her blandishments", by the very specificity and particularity of the detail drawn from the text, stands one's sermon in better stead for textual accuracy, has a better chance of carrying significant freight of authority from the text, and will more likely require the preacher to continue consulting his pericope to learn how to develop the sermon. The use of generalizations and abstractions in sermon themes should be avoided. It is better to specify, or particularize. The concrete, historical mode, of scripture, is also more effective in worship. Can it really show and made credible that "God will wipe away all tears?" No. What can be done in a sermon is to dry one very painful

tear arising from a clearly desperate specific hurt which we all suffer just now. And if that hurt and that help have been clearly shown us by a text, we have a biblical sermon! Although no universal claim was made, it will be more nearly believed hearing that sermon than the former.

The form of the sample sermon, enabled homiletics to stand in the way of listening to the word available in the text. Why does the sermon have three points? Are there three of anything in the text? Let's grant for the moment that the preacher's subject, "worship", is the subject of the text. Why develop the subject that way? Worship in Israel is a subject about which we know something but it was worship as an essay subject in our modern experience which the preacher's homiletics has taught him how to handle. We all know that worship can be both public and private, so he divides the subject in that fashion. Why does the preacher struggle to come up with that rather awkward second point? Why the unlikely triad "public-practical-private?" Surely a more usual opposite number for "practical" is "impractical" or "theoretical"; yet he couples it with "public" and "private" because conventional homiletics has it that a sermon needs three points and is even better if they are stated alliteratively!

Also, the preacher knows how to sub-divide a theme. Public worship contains praise, prayer, and preaching - we all know that, but the farther homiletics leads the

preacher, the farther we get from what's going on in the text. There are no praise, prayer and preaching in the pericope.

Look at form at another point. Because creative interpretation is misunderstood and misplaced, homiletical procedures the preacher knows have shaped the sermon with a form and movement so different from that of the text as to make encounter with the textual reality exceedingly difficult. It causes the sermon to use materials quite unrelated to those of the text, i.e., materials appropriate to a sermon of three points with double sub-division, but not appropriate to the content of the pericope.

The text is a human, biographical, dramatic narrative, with a dynamic movement to resolution. This is its form and movement. The sermon has the shape and movement of analytical, almost scientific, discourse, breaking ideas into their components and assessing their comparative worth. The text evokes human experience and emotion, inviting our identification with a slice of life which could speak of our own experience. The sermon's shape and movement evoke a cool and righteous exercise of the mind and will to continue to embrace a teaching we have already granted is true before we heard the sermon. There is no real human struggle and victory. There is only a hortatory proving and urging of the good.

Why should a text which bears witness to an excitingly human struggle, unfolding to victorious climax, issue from the pulpit in a sermon which is static, analytical, abstract in major content, hortatory in need and object? Is it not because the preacher assumes that form and movement are more "Homiletical" (not substantial) matters and may be chosen for their modern appeal or their agreement with pulpit convention?

## Chapter IV

## THE NEW HERMENEUTIC: A WAY TO LIBERATE PREACHING

A lot has been heard lately about a "New Hermeneutic". Biblical scholars speak about a new perspective in biblical interpretation, theologians speak about a new perspective in biblical theology, language philosophers speak about a new perspective on language function, and literary critics speak about criticism and appreciation of classical texts and graphic art, such as painting and sculpture.

Within the world of religious professions, concern with new hermeneutic has been confined to the academic community of scholars, professors, and theological students. The books and articles discussing it (in its several variant forms) have been frankly theoretical, and just as frankly addressed to readers assumed to be operating in an informed scholarly context.

If one were to ask even the most studious lay members of churches what they thought about it and whether their preacher made use of the new hermeneutic, one would encounter almost universal incomprehension. Nor do I believe a poll of parish ministers would reveal a handful in hundreds who have more than a vague awareness that the topic is being discussed in the academic community. That is a pity, because the concerns of the new hermeneutics are

capable of producing important improvements in preaching.

I should like, in these pages, to interpret and pragmatically apply the new hermeneutic to the task of preaching. I will not make a critical analysis of the field nor a comparison of the contrasting ideas and concerns of various scholars. It is not the aim of this work to bring a synopsis of the works which have triggered new interest in hermeneutics. Rather, seeing certain basic perspectives operating in the new hermeneutics, I intend to summarize what the new hermeneutic has taught me as it relates to the preacher's basic task.

One reservation is in order at this point. I do not believe there is anything new about the "new" hermeneutic. I understand it to be a new encounter, in different context and with different categories, with what responsible exegesis and interpretation have ever been at their best. I must further opine, however, that such responsible work has seldom been widely appreciated or understood--much less practiced--in the pulpit. It is the practice of such exegesis and interpretation by the parish preacher, which increasingly demands my attention and labor and furnishes motivation for this writing.

#### TEXTUAL INTEGRITY AND POWER

One important way of saying what has come home with renew force through the new hermeneutic, is this: When



one is working toward a sermon arising from an established unit of Scripture, one has a real, active partner in the task. The pericope is not simply the record, in language symbols, of an ancient event, from which I am to draw certain valid conclusions about what happened and what that event teaches about life and its living. It is the record of that event, but failure on my part to appreciate the dynamic nature and intention of the pericope has often led me to violate its integrity. I may fail to appreciate functionally, in the things I do and think in putting a sermon together, that the pericope is also working on the sermon.<sup>1</sup>

The New Hermeneutic has brought me a new awareness that the sermon is not in my hands and my mind alone to shape and direct toward an object and with content which seems appropriate to me as the spiritual leader of my flock and the professional who is equipped with the skills for the task. Rather, it has impressed upon me with fresh vigor that honestly encountering a biblical pericope often means a creative confrontation with a powerful, moving reality which has its own ideas about the outcome of our partnership's work toward a sermon.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul J. Achtemeier, An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 119.

Let me illustrate what I am referring to by citing a few typical failures to sermons to allow the text to function in the shaping of the sermon: a radio preacher's sermon on Psalm 19:1-14 is a logical and responsible argument for the existence of God. He urges that we may believe in God because so many sensitive and learned persons have done so and have been benefited by their belief. The Psalmist is not, here or anywhere in Scripture, arguing the case for God's existence--he simply assumes it--so whatever that pericope is trying to say to the preacher, and through him to us, is not heard. After we've listened to his sermon, we still don't know what Psalm 19 is trying to tell us!

Or take the case of a preacher whom I recently heard preach on Jesus and the woman at the well, reported in John 4. He was interested in making soul-winners of his people. He said the Holy Spirit led Jesus to meet the woman for her salvation (just as He would lead modern Christians to the unsaved), despite the fact that the pericope clearly implies other reasons for Jesus' itinerary and that the meeting was pure chance. Had he been listening to the pericope, as his active partner in forming the sermon, he might have learned that it isn't particularly about soul-winning at all, and may be concerned about justifying Jesus to his critics who were incensed that he associated with outcasts. The pericope may have been trying to say something to us about our resentment of the gospel's consistent

concern with unlovely, uncouth, improper people whom we usually ignore and avoid. We didn't hear what the pericope was trying to say, because the preacher wasn't listening, expecting that the text, too, would be actively shaping the sermon's subject, content, and aim.

Now, let's acknowledge that the preachers just mentioned were not purposely misusing their texts, stubbornly insisting on saying what they wanted to in spite of the clear urging of the pericope in another direction. What accounts for such violations of scriptural integrity is even more dangerous and insidious precisely because it is not purposely done and happens without our fully realizing it. What happens to us in sermon preparation to cause such incongruity between our sermons and the texts from which we supposedly preach them?

1. Familiarity is an important contributor to the problem. We do know something of the content of the Scripture, and as we reread a pericope in the sermon building process, it is like seeing again a familiar movie. We know what the outcome is going to be, what the important turning points in the story are--so we watch quite differently than if we were seeing a new movie, whose outcome we don't already know. We are familiar, not only with the pericope itself, but with standard ways of interpreting it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>James Daane, Preaching with Confidence (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 61.

By way of illustration, Luke 15 comes to us familiarly packaged and labeled by previous interpreters at the tops of the pages as three stories about things lost--a sheep, a coin, and a son who is not just lost, but a "prodigal", to boot. Old, familiar homiletical emphasis on seeking the lost crowd in on our sermon building efforts, call so loudly for our attention that we cannot hear the pericope itself. When we expectantly listen to the chapter as a real partner in sermon-making (instead of assuming by default that our familiar understanding of it is correct and spending our creative efforts "applying" that understanding) we may hear it saying, with a mounting crescendo of repetition, and a final piercing relevance. "Heaven rejoices when a sinner repents; again, I repeat, the very angels of God are joyous when a sinner repents; and again, I say, God himself celebrates happily the repentance of a sinner; why are you angry and resentful and feel superior to sinners?"<sup>3</sup> The pericope really isn't urging us to go out and save souls, nor is it urging sinners to repent and be saved, and the final story is not about a first-century hippy who ran away and wasted Dad's money and disgraced the family by his debauchery. The chapter clearly is about reaction to sinners--joyful in heaven when they repent--grumbling and resentful on earth that Jesus even has any

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<sup>3</sup>Luke 15:7

dealings with them; and the final story is about us--the elder brother Pharisees who refuse to join God's celebration, angry that our righteous goodness is not rewarded properly, and those lazy sinners are not getting punished.

Familiarity prevents genuine conversation with, and responsible listening to, the pericope, just as familiarity with a wife or husband leads us to assume we know how he or she will react and, therefore, fail to hear what actually takes place or is said.

2. "I-it" attitudes toward the text lead us logically to assume that we, the human, rational, sensitive, adaptive elements in the encounter, are to be the actors, the appliers, the users of "it" (the text) to construct the sermon. Look at our language: books and courses focus on the "Use of the Bible in Preaching"; one preacher asks another, "How are you going to handle that text?"; "I never thought of applying it that way." (Assumption: the preacher is properly the one who applies; no question raised whether the pericope is aimed that way.)<sup>4</sup> Compare with common things said by viewers in an exhibition of paintings: "How does that grab you?" "It doesn't do anything for me." We somehow expect that a painting or a symphony is active, reaches into us and evokes dialogue

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<sup>4</sup>Dwight E. Stevenson, In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 65.

but that a text is just there, waiting for us to do something with it.

A part of this problem arises from the truth claims we make for the Scriptures. Truth is so easily understood to be fixed principle, "objectively" real dicta about life, over against which we are the variable, changing, transitory, and therefore the actors who understand and react to truth, either rightly or wrongly. The truth just is; it's there; in preaching, we take it in our minds and fit it to modern life, applying it. We, the active, creative subjects do something with it, the inert object.

Another part of the problem lies in precedent established by our "fathers" in the pulpit. Allegorical exegesis, far older than Origen but first widely popularized by him, has long since made it acceptable to assume that the text lies dumb before the preacher until he unlocks its interpretation. Origen's method never said that--in fact it spoke to the contrary about the power of the text to speak on a deeper level than the merely literal-grammatical meaning of the words. But the method in practice said quite clearly that the plain voice of the text's literal words is not enough. It is powerless until the deeper interpretation and application is made by the preacher. Once that assumption prevails, the damage is done. Let us not so severely castigate the allegorical exegete who interprets Canticles' "kisses of my lover's

mouth" as "the words of Jesus to the believer", and then make the same assumption that the pericope is just there, true but inert, awaiting our interpretation and application to the life of our people.

3. Homiletical greed is a third influence subtly playing upon us, inviting us to violate the text's integrity and preach our own sermon without fully realizing the text had no responsible part in forming it. Given the familiarity of text and interpretation, and the "I-it" attitudes we have mentioned, the stage is set for homiletical greed.

The preacher is after a sermon, and that means he must have an "idea", or an outline, or a "gimmick", such as a provocative image or analogy around which to weave his materials. If his natural or learned inclination is toward neat and highly visible outline, his greedy eye will fasten firmly and quickly upon pericopes which seem to break into neat categories. Typologically handling parables is a good illustration; the parable of the good samaritan yields three neat points which are types of persons--the priest (minister), the levite (deacon) and the humanitarian layman (samaritan in this outline is seldom relevantly translated). Or, "Now abideth faith, hope and love . . ." yields a neat "Faith is good, Hope is good, Love is best" outline, despite the fact that the three chapters in the midst of which that one verse is found are not at all about

faith and hope. That chapters 12 and 14 of I Corinthians are a unit dealing with spiritual gifts used in an unloving manner, and 13 is a hymn to love which answers poetically the problem of gifts escapes the attention of the preacher; he fastens on faith, hope and love greedily and the major voice of the pericope is stilled in his subsequent sermon. Let it be a rule that when a pericope seems to break neatly into parts for our outline we will actively consider the possibility that it did so because we were looking for an outline, and have not yet listened to the text.

If the preacher's inclination is toward gimmicks, he can fasten readily on the cockcrow when Peter denied Jesus and launch into all of the warnings which God sends us to call us home before it is too late. His sermon may be interesting, memorable, even theologically mature; but it is his, not the text's. He has listened only long enough to grab a device he can use to do his own thing. A preacher inclined toward such a practice soars high above the pericope like an eagle in search of prey, and ignoring the vast expanse of the context which beckons him elsewhere, spies his prey and plunges strait and true upon it.

We've been talking about violating the integrity of the text by means of attitudes and activities in sermon construction which forget the pericope is a partner, fully as active and pregnant with promise as our fertile imaginations, and, that it has at least as much to say as do we



about the sermon's subject and aim and content.

#### DISCOVERY OR DISCLOSURE?

Another way of saying what the new hermeneutic has to offer is this: My partner in putting together the sermon (I mean the pericope) has trouble teaching me because, in my anxiety to use my skills and do my job properly, I'm trying too hard to learn. That isn't double-talk. As a teacher I'm thwarted by the pupil who enters class with a well-developed agendum and a compulsion to milk me for everything I have that he can use. I don't think I teach him much, although he has a desire to "learn" and goes away with more than he brought into the class.

If we've been talking above about relatively obvious violations of the text, occurring mainly because our attention is elsewhere than on the pericope, we want to consider here more subtle blindness and deafness to the pericope, even though we're overtly trying to be responsible to it.

We are now aware of the dangers posed by the attitudes and actions described above; we are operating from a desire to listen to the text and welcome it into full partnership in creating the sermon. But what we do not can still prevent that happening. Am I, with my exegetical skills, to discover what the pericope says? Do I pull out my commentaries and lexicons and form critical tools and dissect the pericope like a skilled scientist learning what

makes a bug tick? Do I unpack the pericope and discover what it's all about?<sup>5</sup>

While I do not for a moment suggest that the tools of careful exegesis be laid aside and would never think I'd listened to a pericope without thorough use of them, the new hermeneutic has taught me there's an important distinction between discovery and disclosure--and hermeneutics is about disclosure.<sup>6</sup> The word "hermeneutics" is built upon the names of Hermes, messenger of the gods, who brings the word of the gods to men, discloses it to them. He is not an answer man, available for consultation by the curious like an encyclopedia.

1. Exegetical tools equip very well to unpack the ancient event in its own setting and time, and the very formulation of my task as discovery will keep me on the track of elusive nuances of meaning and obscure references to ideas and attitudes of the time. I can hear clearly what the pericope says to its early hearers, but my tools aren't well conceived or designed to hear what it's saying to me. Someone has said we must listen for what the text does not, indeed cannot, say--that is, what it says to us. Conceiving my task as discovery and seeking with exegetical

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 74-75.

<sup>6</sup>William D. Thompson, Preaching Biblically (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 42.

tools to learn what the text says may focus my efforts wrongly.

2. Even though I'm anxious to learn what the text has to say, I take with me on my discovery quest all kinds of limits, biases, sensitivities, and desires, and to the degree that I see myself as a skilled professional, I am inclined not to acknowledge them, even to myself.

There is a tendency in our "discovery" syndrome, because of our attitudes just mentioned, to be keenly aware of certain problems and issues. We then are drawn to pericopes which address them; and we may even be inclined to look for them in pericopes where they wouldn't otherwise be found. It is said that Luther found justification by faith in all sorts of passages previously innocent of such concern. I take with me to my study my own personal and peculiar hurt and emptiness (like Luther's almost morbid need for assurance) and my own peculiar disinterest in, and perhaps half-conscious rejection of certain concerns. It is not surprising if I discover the text speaking to the former and not the latter. But what if I should expect the text to disclose to me my bias?

#### PREPARING FOR DISCLOSURE

Let's set out a few assumptions to work with, and a few things to do in sermon preparation, which may equip us for creative, expectant partnership with the text.

Assumption One. Our familiar understandings are suspect, must be investigated, perhaps rejected. The Greek word for "revelation" means literally the uncovering or disclosure of what was hidden; if scripture, and preaching from scripture, it to be revelation to us, then it isn't a matter of proceeding with familiar understandings.

Such an assumption calls for an agnostic attitude. We do not know the word of God in our pericope, although we are familiar with the words. To know is to be known, and when that pericope really engages me, something hidden is uncovered--revealed to me and in me. This is not to say that hermeneutics constantly changes the content and direction of doctrine with new revelations. It is to say that when I don't expect new and creative engagement from a pericope I probably won't get it and will go on preaching my own sermons on a text which wants to say otherwise.

Assumption Two. Truth doesn't exist; it happens. The text is not just there--an object awaiting my effort to learn from it. It's really there, active, reaching, probing, ready to engage me.<sup>7</sup> I don't find truth, it happens to me. Further, we do not find truth in the text and then, turning to our congregation, apply the truth (usually a law or principle) to modern life in our sermons. Scripture contains a record that truth happened--to Nicodemus or the

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<sup>7</sup>Stevenson, p. 67.

woman at the well. It didn't happen (or another truth happened) to the rich ruler and most of the Pharisees. The truth is not what any of these people said, nor what the Scripture or the sermon says about them; it is what happened, and what happens to us today when we are engaged, confronted by their experiences within our own personal contexts. Many would acknowledge that preaching is not trying to articulate truth, but is rather trying to let it happen to us.<sup>8</sup> Can we not understand our work toward a sermon in the same way? Truth isn't there in the text awaiting our study; truth is what happens to us, and in us, when we allow the pericope its own dynamic integrity to engage us. Our research for truth is likely to find its object--it's not likely to find what we have hidden from ourselves. But the pericope can uncover it--and that's a "happening"!

On the basis of the previous discussion we can draw the following principles to liberate our preaching:

1. Set aside, as completely as possible, all our familiar understandings of what it's about, what it says concerning its subject, how it applies to modern life. This also means actively refusing to look for outline points: provocative figures which would function well rhetorically, or devices or gimmicks around which to hang sermon

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

materials. Try to listen as if it were a new word, never heard before, whose intent is not yet known, whose important, key reality and less important, incidental details are not yet differentiated.

2. Search for assumptions in our modern lives and experience which prejudice us against hearing its word. For instance, does our modern assumption that the resurrection of Jesus is a unique, never-repeated event stand in the way of our hearing from the resurrection narratives what early hearers heard?<sup>9</sup> Some of them assumed that the Messiah's coming would be marked by a widespread opening of graves and raising of the dead, and Jesus' resurrection was merely the first. Does our assumption get in the way? Or, perhaps we assume that the rich ruler's giving away all he had would make him a renowned and respected philanthropist (it well might in our situation). It's rather clear that in his context poverty was the clear stigma of an unworthy person, a sinner, a social outcast, and Jesus was asking him not only to give up his riches but also to surrender his self-respect and the respect of his society. Does our assumption get in the way?

3. Search for assumptions different from our own in the interpretive context of the pericope. We have mentioned two above, in order to sharply contrast our own.

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<sup>9</sup>Achtemeir, p. 140.

Such assumptions in the minds of people, then, do not always run counter to ours; they may simply be unparallel in our context and unknown to us. For instance, does it help, in the "render to Caesar" encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, to know that the Pharisees already assumed, indeed knew, from the clear teaching of their law, that it is wrong to pay tribute? Does it help us to hear the text if we encounter their guilty struggle between clear law they want desperately to obey and social-political realities which seem to necessitate compromise? Or does it help us as we hear the story of Lazarus and the rich man to know that, not only did many assume that poverty results from sin and riches from righteousness, but many also expected a "great reversal" in the new age, when the first would be last and the rich poor, and vice-versa?

It will be obvious from my description of assumptions to be found that I'm taking for granted that all the tools of responsible exegesis are being fully employed.

4. Expect the unexpected: assume the passage is engaging us where we aren't looking, that it is bringing a disclosure that may be unwelcome, contradictory of what we shallowly accept--or even scandalous. The Jews didn't expect anything good to come from Nazareth, nor for the Messiah to make trouble. Everyone knew righteous people don't contaminate themselves by associating with Samaritan dogs, eating with common sinners, prostitutes, or

collaborators with Rome. One of Jesus' continuing problems with his disciples was that what he did was unexpected by them, and they had trouble dealing with that. If scripture is revelation, and if we have not yet reached full Christian maturity, we ought to expect a text now and then to surprise us, to challenge our thinking and doing. That expectation can open us to the text. Not every pericope will startle us thus; many will serve to affirm and deepen what is already within us, but we'll seldom hear the unexpected if we unthinkingly seek only affirmation and further elucidation of our current understandings.

5. More pointedly, expect surprise in two ways: one, assume that something will be uncovered from which we have fled. Assume we have something to hide, that we're hiding it, and the text is chipping away our defenses, helping us to confront ourselves, our repressions, evasions and rationalizing. Actively ask "What is it that we want to forget, ignore, dismiss, which the text insists we must face?"

Two, expect the affirmation of something we've longed for, but dared not believe and trust. Assume that our finest hopes and dreams for life are crippled because we lack the courage to give ourselves to what seems so visionary, so dangerous, so costly, and that the text is telling us it's worth the risk, that our reservations are



self-defeating, that what we poignantly wish could be true really is--and it's trying to happen to us!

I'm saying here that, for all its contradiction, scandal, judgment and demand, the word strikes a responsive spot in us. What is uncovered is not easy, not common sense, not the accepted thing; but it does ring true, in spite of the threat it brings. Something in us responds, "Yes, I guess I always knew I'd have to face that." It also responds, "Yes, I've wanted to believe that's the way life is; now I think I've got the guts to try it," thus experiencing liberation to proclaim the truth.

PART TWO

THE PREACHING OF LIBERATION

## Chapter V

## LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA

Liberation Theology is the first non-imitative theology to have sprung from the third world nations: Indeed, the first creative theological thought to have arisen outside of Europe or North America since the earliest years of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

## BACKGROUND

According to Gustavo Gutierrez, "the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a new way to do theology."<sup>2</sup> Theology is defined as critical reflection which includes man's reflection on himself and a critical analysis of socioeconomic issues.<sup>3</sup> This reflection includes a critical look at the Church and its response and commitment to the Gospel. The primary emphasis is on praxis--reflective engagement in social activity. Theology is the critical reflection on the praxis of

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Kirk, Liberation Theology (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p. 204.

<sup>2</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

Christians. Increasingly, praxis is the context "where the Christian works out his destiny as a human and his life of faith in the Lord of history. Participation in the process of liberation is obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection."<sup>4</sup>

Gutierrez identifies three reciprocally interpenetrating approaches to the process of liberation: (1) the aspiration of oppressed peoples and social classes focusing on economic, social, and political issues; (2) historical liberation leading to the creation of a new humanity and a qualitatively different society; and (3) Biblical sources which present Christ as the liberator.<sup>5</sup> The first level is one of political action, the second is utopian, and the third is the level of faith. Other liberationists, including Dom Helder Camara and Camilo Torres, agree that liberation is the process by which a "new man must emerge."<sup>6</sup>

All theologies of liberation grow out of a concrete historical situation. In Latin American, the historical context is that of colonialism. The first wave of colonialism began with the conquest of the continent by Spain in the sixteenth century. Christianity (the Cross) and the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>6</sup>Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 40.

Spanish crown (the sword) were identical. Allegiance to the king of Spain and submission to his God were demanded of the Indians.<sup>7</sup> The combination of cross and sword had a lasting effect on the history of Latin America.

The semi-feudal social system of sixteenth century Spain was transplanted to Latin America. The patterns of land ownership which were established at the time of the conquest have continued to the present. This pattern resulted in a two-class society--lord and servant. Today eighty percent of all fertile land is owned by five to fifteen percent of the population.<sup>8</sup>

Another lasting effect of colonialism was the relationship between Church and State. There were, of course, notable exceptions (Bartolome de Las Casas), but for the most part the Church was intimately identified with the dominant, ruling class against the interests of Indians and peasants. The institutional Church was such an integral part of the colonial structure that it was doomed to become defensive and reactionary when the social order collapsed during the struggles for independence.<sup>9</sup> Only in very recent years has the Church responded to the socioeconomic conditions in Latin America and joined the movement for liberation.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-8.

In this respect, the Latin American Conference of Bishops (CELAM) meeting at Medellin, Colombia in 1968 marked the beginning of a new era for the Church. At this meeting the bishops expressed their concern for the people and developed pastoral guidelines. Pope Paul VI, in the encyclical Populorum progressio, denounced international imperialism and injustice.<sup>10</sup>

It would be a mistake to think of colonialism only in terms of the sixteenth century. Independence from Spain led to neocolonialism in the nineteenth century. The United States and Great Britain both became involved in Latin America and followed a policy of continued dependence for Latin American countries. The dependent countries were to provide cheap labor, raw materials, and markets for the Anglo-Saxon world. Latin American underdevelopment is the dark side of northern development and northern development is built on third-world underdevelopment.<sup>11</sup>

It is against this background that liberation theology has been born. According to Lucio Gera, an Argentinian priest:

The Latin American people becomes today intimately aware of their domination and intimately decides their LIBERATION. Dependence and liberation are not abstract enunciations: they mean cultural liberation (breaking away from the liberal-Enlightenment-magisterial culture in order to cultivate a culture of the people), polit-

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<sup>10</sup>Gutierrez, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup>Bonino, p. 16.

ical liberation (from the power of 'the empire' which is at present represented by the USA and its oligarchic clientele), and structural liberation (the end of the bourgeois state and the creation of a different shape of society, a socialist one).<sup>12</sup>

In this setting, the Church is challenged to preach the liberating contents derived from the kerygma.<sup>13</sup> According to Gutierrez, socio-political struggle, human maturity, and reconciliation with God do not belong to different realms but to a single saving reality. The salvific action of God underlies all human existence.<sup>14</sup> Gutierrez and other liberation theologians turn to the Bible to demonstrate the salvific work of God in human history.

The Exodus Event (Exodus, chapters 1-5) provides the first example. The liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt is a key event for Israel. The liberation had social and political implications, and it did not begin as a spiritual movement. The Hebrews were suffering oppression under Pharoah and were incapable of hoping for salvation. "They did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit" (Ex. 6:9). Like all oppressed people, the Hebrew slaves had internalized their oppression. Andre Neher writes: "With the Exodus a new age has struck for humanity: redemption from misery. If the Exodus had not taken place, marked as

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 67-68.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>14</sup>Gutierrez, p. 153.

it was by the twofold sign of the overriding will of God and the free and conscious assent of men, the historical destiny of humanity would have followed another course."<sup>15</sup> The Exodus experience is paradigmatic. It remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the People of God undergo"<sup>16</sup>--a very powerful message for oppressed people struggling for liberation!

The other biblical theme used by Gutierrez and others is Christ the Liberator. The work of Christ is a new creation and through him creation acquires its full meaning. The work of Christ is a liberation which creates a new chosen people including all humanity.<sup>17</sup> "It is the same God who, in the fullness of time, sends his Son in the flesh, so that He might come to liberate all men from all slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, oppression, and ignorance--in a word, that injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness."<sup>18</sup> The Exodus is brought to fulfillment in Christ.

#### PREACHING VALUES

Theologically, liberation theology informs me that

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 176.



God is interested in all of life--not in some fragmented, dualistic, individualistic perversion of life, but in a wholistic way as set forth in Jesus' ordination sermon (Luke 4:16-30), or the Judgment of the Nations (Matthew 25:31-46), or the liberation story par excellence (Exodus 12-14). No accident or oversight occurred when the ancient Hebrews failed to develop a word for body.<sup>19</sup> A person stands before God in the wholeness of being, and God responds to the wholeness of that person's being. Howard Clinebell seems to be in touch with that awareness in saying, "By concentrating almost exclusively on enhancing our psyches, most traditional psychotherapists have perpetuated, and even increased, that alienation from our bodies which had contributed to the impoverished of our psyches."<sup>20</sup>

Immediately upon saying the above, a note of caution must be sounded. Samuel Ruiz has both sounded it and offered a corrective. Undoubtedly a theology of liberation can be developed from biblical texts, and, while it is constitutive of biblical theology, it does not constitute a theology of the Bible or even of the Old or New Testament. The distinction is crucial. Liberation must always be understood as a gift. That is to say that it must be viewed

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<sup>19</sup>John A. T. Robinson, The Body (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>Howard Clinebell, Growth Counseling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 25.

theocentrically or in light of the Name from which it comes and toward which it must move--Yahweh or Jesus. In other words, liberation must always be related to the broadest possible horizon of reality to which God is related. Only then will it be delivered from the hazards of reductionism and individualism. In and of itself, liberation is not self-legitimatizing.<sup>21</sup>

The Exodus account depicts liberation (chapters 12-14), as a gift from Yahweh (Exodus 3:7-8, 17, 20-21; 6:6-8; 12:51; 13:3; 15:1-18) as an act of self-revelation (Exodus 6:7; 7:5; 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2) so that the Israelite slaves might be delivered from their oppression (chapters 1-11), for worship (Exodus 3:18; 5:3; 8:27; 10:25; 12:14) and service to Yahweh (chapters 15 on). There are extensive lists in the Old Testament, regarding the shape which this service is to take, but it is stated most succinctly perhaps in Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8.

But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an  
ever-flowing stream. (Amos)

He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does Yahweh require  
of you  
but to do justice, and to love  
mercy,  
and to walk humbly with your  
God? (Micah)

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<sup>21</sup>Samuel Ruiz, Theologia Biblica de la Liberacion (Mexico: Libreria Parroquial, 1975), pp. 7-11.

These foundational horizons of reality are expressed in the New Testament in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40 and parallels) as exegeted for us through the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Against these universal understandings, the depth of meaning in John 10:10 and the richness of its implications for liberation theology can be appreciated. Oppression takes on many forms that subvert justice and righteousness. Its name is truly legion. The capitalism and development mentality of First World nations have been identified as two of its names. Yet, there is among us a Liberator "that we may have life, and have it abundantly," Liberation is a gift of God and, as such, is not to be denied to anyone or withheld from any growth-situation, be it personal or institutional.

The proclamation of these "good news" of liberation is actually the challenge for preachers in Latin America today. This proclamation requires the liberation of preaching, which, in turn, requires earnest consideration of significant elements which affect the hermeneutical task.

## Chapter VI

## READING THE TIMES

SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS WHICH AFFECT THE  
HERMENEUTICAL TASKThe End of Regula Fidei

The expression regula fidei was concerned primarily with the authoritative interpretation of Scripture by the Roman Catholic church. The Reformers' objection to the regula fidei set up by the church of Rome was that it was an authority independent of Scripture. They agreed that the Reformation was needed because, to a greater or lesser degree, the tradition of the church made it difficult, if not impossible, to read the Bible correctly. Thus, in a sense, the Reformation of the sixteenth century was an attempt to rediscover the biblical word, somehow obscured by its traditional interpretation.

By what means, then, could the Reformers determine which interpretations were valid and which were not true? They could not appeal to any new rule of faith, for they had by now trumpeted forth the principle of sola scriptura: doctrine and discipline must now be based on Scripture alone. The solution was to argue that the Bible was to be its own interpreter. In opposition to the principle that allowed tradition to interpret Scripture, the Reformers

championed the hermeneutical principle that "Scripture interprets Scripture," commonly called the "analogy or rule of faith."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, contemporary men and women pervert this dictum that "Scripture interprets Scripture" when they fail to realize that the Reformers used it only as a relative expression aimed specifically at tradition; it was never intended to be understood as an absolute and positive principle that excluded other elements necessary for biblical interpretation.

The problem for us evangelicals today is that the principle of sola scriptura, loaded with hermeneutical rules, has become our regula fidei, our tradition, and according to Justo L. Gonzalez, the first task of liberation theologians and preachers is to rid themselves of any undue burden of tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Today's theological debate, however, has nothing to do with the source of inspiration (Scripture), nor with the parameters of interpretation (Scripture interpreting Scripture), but with the possibility of interpretation. The meaning of the term "possibility," especially at the

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<sup>1</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Meanings from God's Message: Matters for Interpretation," Christianity Today (October 5, 1979), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Justo L. and Catherine G. Gonzalez, Liberation Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), p. 31.

point of dealing with the most fundamental issue of hermeneutics, will be clarified in this chapter. The problem is to be found at a deeper level. One can go on confessing loyalty to sola scriptura with all of its hermeneutical rules, and at the end find that one is not communicating the liberating message of the Word of God to the people.

### The Growth of Science

Since the Reformers, a tremendous scientific development has taken place. We can name, for example, five disciplines which affect our hermeneutical task. They are: linguistics, cultural anthropology, phenomenology, historiography, and philosophy. Obviously there are many more. One can observe how hermeneutics is linked to semantic problems nowadays: how it is related to cultural problems in a way it had never been before.<sup>3</sup> Someone has suggested that hermeneutics and the theological task are merely "reactions to the world."<sup>4</sup> Some historiographers believe that objective history is impossible, since we have only interpretations of historical facts. We ask, is that not the

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<sup>3</sup>John Stott (ed.), Gospel and Culture (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), p. x.

<sup>4</sup>Bryan R. Wilson, Magic and the Millennium (London: Heineman Press, 1973), p. 104.

case with hermeneutics? Finally, the growing interest and emphasis on different ideologies and philosophical systems such as "Worldview" (Cosmovision), represents a challenge to the possibilities of an objective interpretation of the Word.

### The Media

Latin America is already experiencing another conquest: the new electronic conquest, the conquest of the media. This conquest is already affecting the task of hermeneutics in our continent. It is important to note that the hermeneutical task of the Reformers was new not due only to spiritual changes, but also due to the changes in the means of communication. Martin Luther's use of the printed page placed strong emphasis on written hermeneutics over and against oral hermeneutics. In our day, in Latin America, television and the mass media affect the task of biblical interpretation. With the possibilities of computer languages like FORTRAN and ALGOL, how are we to face the challenge of hermeneutics?

### Locus and Terminus

We will use the terms locus and terminus with a particular meaning in mind. By locus we mean the main key for the work of interpretation. Some interpreters would find their locus in praxis, the human being or the Word of God. It is obvious that the problem of these times of which

we are reading about, is a problem of the right kind of tools, the problem of locus.

Terminus, on the other hand, is concerned with "the starting point" for our hermeneutics. Again, that could be praxis, the Word of God, a philosophical system, and so forth. In some systems, then, locus and terminus are not the same. Padilla, for example, would say that his terminus is the Word of God, but his locus would be "the culture."<sup>5</sup> The rule that "Scripture interprets Scripture" would consider locus and terminus to be synonyms. Gustavo Gutierrez would say that terminus is praxis and locus is the Word of God.<sup>6</sup>

We have to realize that the challenges of the twentieth century are different than those of the sixteenth or the nineteenth centuries. It's not God, or His Word that have changed, but the need is there: the need to understand His Word, interpret His Word, proclaim His Word and obey His Word facing the challenges of this day and age. This is the task of hermeneutics within the theological process. The question is if our hermeneutical tools are adequate--if our hermeneutical system is really objective.

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<sup>5</sup>Rene Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture" in John Stott (ed.) Gospel and Culture (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), p. 89.

<sup>6</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).



## THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

We must then, raise the question: is objectivity possible in hermeneutics? The answer to this question is essential if we are going to find a regula fidei in the twentieth century. If the answer is a categorical "yes"; then the locus and the terminus we choose are very important. There are four main keys to use in approaching hermeneutics and the attempt to answer the question. They are: the philosophical key, the cultural key, the socio-political key, and the linguistical key.

### The Philosophical Problem

Is objectivity possible when we talk about the past? It is true that words and deeds of the past had a unique and special objectivity in their times and in their context (sitz im leben). Is it possible to be objective in trying to rescue their original objectivity? The grammatico-historical school would say that it is possible, although that school would have to recognize that it holds a positivist philosophical presupposition which formally assumes that the world then corresponds to the world now. It presupposes, also, that we can be neutral in our quest and evaluation of the past. It presupposes a "tabula rasa" on which the past writes the present and the future. Another possibility would be to follow Plato and idealism, rejecting

the possibility of total objectivity and accepting the totality of experience past and present. This alternative will tend to be more interested in ontology than in praxis, recognize the possibility of coherence and a dynamic equivalency between past and present events. What that means is that the ultimate question is an epistemological question. Finally any system of hermeneutics possesses a philosophical presupposition behind.

### The Cultural Problem

Regarding the cultural conditioning of Scripture, the Laussane Committee's Theology and Education Group wrote as part of the Willowbank Report, the following:

We are agreed that some biblical commands (e.g., regarding the veiling of women in public and washing one another's feet) refer to cultural customs now obsolete in many parts of the world. Faced by such texts, we believe the right response is neither a slavishly literal obedience nor an irresponsible disregard, but rather first a critical discernment of the text's inner meaning and then a translation of it into our own culture.<sup>7</sup>

This problem is part of the debate on contextualization of the Gospel. Recently Charles Taber has also suggested the possibility that one's hermeneutical stance is part and parcel of the cultural heritage one has received.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>"Lausanne Occasional Papers, No. 2 The Willowbank Report" in Stott, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Kaiser.

Taber's point is that possibly there are as many proper, yet differing, approaches to the text of Scripture as there are cultures and societies. We, in turn, raised the question: how independent from culture can we be in our hermeneutical task?

### The Socio-Political Problem

For a Marxist historian objectivity is not possible. One must be on the side of the poor and the oppressed and interpret reality from the perspective of that society and from the perspective of economic relations. Traditional Western hermeneutics presupposes capitalist elements, concepts regarding time, material wealth, individualism, strong emphasis on asebia more than adikia (Romans 1:18). One only needs to observe how difficult it is to find articles on "poverty" in commentaries written in Europe or the United States. Is that a sign that our socio-political position affects our hermeneutical task?

### The Linguistic Problem

The most important theoretician of philosophical hermeneutics is Hans-George Gadamer, who accepted and extended Martin Heidegger's thought. At the heart of his concern was the premise that the meaning of a text was not the same as the author's meaning. The author's meaning was, in any case, inaccessible to us. Instead, the meaning of a

text was in its subject matter, which was at once independent of both the author and reader, and somehow shared by both of them. Moreover, no one could ever say this is the meaning of a text, since the number of possible meanings was practically endless and constantly changing.<sup>9</sup>

Severino Croatto suggests that we can speak of a circular dialectic between event and word, and, by the same token, between kerygma and situation, between the biblical word of liberation and our process of liberation.

But a hermeneutic reading of the biblical message occurs only when the reading supersedes the first contextual meaning (not only that of the author but also that of his first readers). This happens through the unfolding of a surplus-of-meaning disclosed by a new question addressed to the text.<sup>10</sup>

In Latin America we have a world full of religious symbolism which is very much part of our hermeneutics. It is necessary for us to consider not only the historicgrammatical questions, but also the world of symbols, signs, analogies and allegories which are part of our theological presuppositions and hermeneutics.

It is obvious that the idea of pure objectivity is a myth, and hard for any interpreter to support. Our personal and societal backgrounds structure our views of reality. Would it not be better for me as an interpreter in Latin America to confess and recognize this fact and try to

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>J. Severino Croatto, Liberacion y Libertad (Lima: CEP, 1978), p. 25.

develop a hermeneutical system more faithful to God and to His Word, and more faithful to the concreteness of history and the realities of my people, realizing, at the same time, my limitations as a human being--a sinner saved by grace?

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## Chapter VII

## FINDING WAYS TO PROCLAIM LIBERATION

## APPROACHES

Rene Padilla presents different types of hermeneutics and says that, roughly speaking, there are three approaches to Scripture, depending upon the attitude to hermeneutics adopted by the interpreter: the intuitive approach, the scientific approach, and the contextual approach.<sup>1</sup>

The Intuitive Approach

This is perhaps the method used by the vast majority of evangelicals. The main concern of the interpreter is with the relevance and personal appropriation of the message to his own situation. The value of this approach is that it recognizes the fact that Scripture was meant for common people. Interpreters such as Dussell and Croatto, in their effort to build a bridge between the past and the present, usually ignore the additional and very important fact of the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of hermeneutics--the Holy Spirit who is author and interpreter. This is what

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<sup>1</sup>Rene Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture" in John Stott (ed.) Gospel and Culture (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), p. 89.

makes the Bible different from any other book of the past, and the modern interpreter different from any other interpreter.

On the other hand the intuitive approach can easily lead to allegorizations in which the literal meaning of the text is lost, ignoring important contextual elements. The question to be posed to this approach is whether the appropriation of the biblical message is possible without doing violence to the biblical text.

### The Scientific Approach

The importance of linguistic and historical studies for the interpretation of Scripture is obvious. This is the approach adopted by a large majority of biblical scholars dedicated to the academic study of Scripture. The main concern of the interpreter is with the understanding of the biblical message oriented by the conviction that what is needed for this understanding to be possible is to go back to the Sitz im Leben of the biblical authors. His effort therefore, is by means of grammatico-historical exegesis, to extract from Scripture the more universal elements which the ancient text relays. The elements may then be applied to the modern readers or hearers. There is value in this approach, no doubt, but the limitation, per se, is that it assumes for the interpreter an "objectivity" which is both impossible and undesirable. Many foreign missionaries in

Latin America have done biblical interpretation of this kind and have failed to communicate the biblical message to the people.

### The Contextual Approach

This approach usually employs the "hermeneutical circle." It is a hermeneutical system in which the main exponents recognize different factors that we have mentioned as important elements for hermeneutics. It presupposes that biblical interpretation is not something that has been given once and for all. It is "doing theology" instead of trying to systematize theology. We must recognize that the term "circle" might give the impression of an existentialist or dialectical position. It is important to note that there are different forms in this approach. Juan Luis Segundo, for instance, shows different types of circles.<sup>2</sup> Croatto suggests this circle: ideological suspicion, application of the suspicion, a new way to see reality, a new interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Within evangelical circles Rene Padilla presents this circle: the interpreter's historical situation, the interpreter's world-and-life view, Scripture, and theology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), chapter 1, pp. 7-38.

<sup>3</sup>J. Severino Croatto, Exodus (New York: Orbis Books, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Padilla, pp. 89-99.



Andrew Kirk develops a circle as follows: sola scriptura, the kingdom of God, identification and justification of our modern world view, identification of the biblical world view.<sup>5</sup>

All of these systems, with their valuable apportations to the hermeneutical task, are attempts to solve the global problem of revelation from the past to the incarnation of the word in the world today--attempts to be faithful to the witness of the Gospel and effectively communicate this witness.

#### SEVERINO CROATTO: A HERMENEUTICS OF FREEDOM

Perhaps more than any other, Severino Croatto, a biblical scholar from Argentina, is a paradigm for liberation theology's handling of Scripture. Speaking of the meaning of the Exodus event, Croatto perceives that it is "unconcluded"; therefore, it "becomes a provocative Word, an announcement of liberation for us, the oppressed peoples of the Third World."<sup>6</sup> The oppressive situation "is of a political and social order."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Andrew Kirk, Liberation Theology (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp. 185-194.

<sup>6</sup>Croatto, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

. . . The salvific experience of Israel . . . --without any post-mortem eschatology or body-soul dualism-- emphasized an experience of God as savior on the terrestrial plane; salvation was closely related to the political and the social spheres in which 'independence' was a concrete and existential expression of the protection of its God. This has consequences for a theology of history: God is understood as savior because he acts in human history . . .<sup>8</sup>

Going on to discuss the profundity of the Exodus experience for Israel's self-understanding, Croatto emphasizes how it became pivotal in Israel's discovery of her own vocation-- freedom. The full significance of this concept unfolds as this discovery "is elevated to the category of a message for all humankind."<sup>9</sup> Some penetrating questions are then asked:

If freedom is one of the intrinsic human values, if the message of the Exodus represents it as a people's vocation, then why is there any hesitation to be open to freedom? Why has freedom been nullified in so many traditional forms of Christian life? And here is the most dramatic question of all: Why was the Church so alienated as not to see the signs of the times clearly pointing up the path of liberation?<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of whether one views freedom as essential or derivative, the questions must be pondered.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

## Chapter VIII

## CONCLUSION: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PREACHING

The first part of this work shows very clearly my concern for preaching the word of God, for being faithful to the biblical text. For preaching to be truly biblical it should be freed from the bondages of extra-biblical authorities and traditional and conventional hermeneutics and homiletics.

The second part of this work shows my concern for faithfulness in interpreting the realities of my context, my historical situation in Latin America now. It is impossible to apply the Word of God to human reality and remain immune to all the ideological struggles and social problems of the present. This concluding chapter will show how I face the challenge and tension generated by trying to be both faithful to the Gospel and effective in communicating the message of liberation which I find in the Bible.

I have one fundamental thesis. That is, ministry precedes and produces theology, not the reverse. I must add that ministry is determined and set forth by God's own ministry of revelation and reconciliation in the world, beginning with Israel and culminating in Jesus Christ and the Church.

I understand preaching to be one part of the total theological task which ministry produces, and so, in order

to delineate the place of preaching, one must first give a definitive statement about theology in general. I grew up with the understanding that 'theo'-'logy' was the "study of God." However, as I entered into my formal theological studies, it became clear that God was not available for scientific study. Thus, it has often been argued that theology is the study of, not God, but the human faith response to God. Many theologians have therefore defined theology as the study of the responses of the community of faith. This idea led Pannenberg to write, "Theology is the science of God, but a science which can approach its subject-matter only indirectly, through the study of religions."<sup>1</sup> Schubert Ogden defines theology as "The fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence."<sup>2</sup>

The implicit danger in this approach to theology is that such a theology can become reduced to being just another secular scientific study of human behavior, in this case the human behavior being studied is that of religious activity. I am attracted to Schleiermacher's solution to this problem. He sees theology as not the study of God (normative theology), nor as the study of human experience

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<sup>1</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, Theology and the Philosophy of Science (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 347.

<sup>2</sup>Schubert M. Ogden, "What is Theology," Journal of Religion, 52 (January 1972), p. 98.

and behavior (empirical theology); but as the study of human experience of God, using as a starting place those points where relationship between God and humanity have been experienced.<sup>3</sup> In this way, theology is the reflective study of the acts of God as experienced by humanity and witnessed to by the community of faith.

The phrase 'witnessed to' in the above definition points to my understanding of the central theological task that confronts the Christian community and informs its every effort. In Matthew 28:19 and 20, it is reported that Jesus gave the following directive to the disciples, "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." This goal has become the critical task of the Christian community, to proclaim (communicate) the good news of God's salvific activity to the current society, for the purpose of conversion and edification. The task of Christian theology is to make use of its reflective study in order to instruct the community concerning the best way (by which I mean faithfully and effectively) to proclaim its good news.

Basic to this task is the traditionary process. There are three main parts to this process, the Tradition

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<sup>3</sup>William E. Hordern, A Layman's Guide To Protestant Theology (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 44-46.

(with a capital T), tradition (with a small t), and traditions (in the plural). As originally defined by the Fourth World Conference of Faith and Order, held by the World Council of Churches,<sup>4</sup> the Tradition is the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the faith community. It is the good news about what God has done and is doing as our Creator, our Savior, and our Sustainer - God's actions as experienced by humanity. In contrast to this Tradition, the tradition refers, not to the story that is being transmitted, but rather to the process of transmission itself. It is the act and dynamic process of handing over the gospel witness to another. It is the task of taking the Tradition, and interpreting it into the context of the society being addressed. In this way, the terms "tradition" and "traditional process" are identical and interchangeable and are identical to the critical task of theology. Finally, the traditions are the concrete, historical, and temporary forms of expression used by the Church to transmit the timeless Tradition. These traditions refer to a specific form of expression, such as the use of the confessional in the Roman Catholic Church or a doctrinal formulation. These traditions, hopefully, are constantly

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<sup>4</sup>P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds.) The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal: World Council of Churches, 1963), p. 50.

changing and being interpreted, through the traditional process, in order to keep alive the changeless Tradition.

Understood in this way, the traditional process is one of constant interpretation, in which the history of this process, and of the theology that serves it, has been a history of a continual interpretation of the Gospel into contemporary and understandable terms. Essential to this interpretive task are two important functions. The first is to gain a clear and faithful understanding of the message of the Christian Gospel. The second is to proclaim and interpret this message into those forms which will most clearly and effectively communicate its meaning. These also point to the two dangers that exist within this task. One is that in order to hold firmly to the message of the Christian Gospel, the forms of communication can become rigid, and, as a result, lose their ability to communicate. This is the extreme of dogmatic absolutism. The other danger is to so accommodate the forms of communication to contemporary thought-concepts that the authentic message of the Gospel is lost. Today, this is the danger of agnostic relativism. Thus, this interpretive task that is basic to all theological enterprises called for efforts which strive to be both faithful to the Gospel and effective in their ability to communicate to contemporary society.

With this definition of theology, I am stressing the contention that there is one theology and one theological

enterprise. However, the materials and methods used in attempting to accomplish the task of theology can vary, and it is on this level that different "types" or "branches" of theology exist, one of which has been labeled "practical theology." Historically, there have usually been three branches of theology considered: systematic theology, historical theology (with Biblical theology being a specialized offshoot), and practical theology. These different types or branches of theology use different materials and methods. Systematic Theology has as its starting point the norms and doctrines of the Church using the tools of philosophy, logic, apologetics and polemics. Historical Theology has as its starting point history, working with historical materials, using the tools of historical methodology and analysis. Biblical Theology works with biblical material using the tools of exegesis and hermeneutics. Practical Theology has as its starting point "praxis," that is the immediate human situation and human actions, using the tools of sociology, psychology and anthropology. Preaching draws materials and uses tools from all of these branches of theology and could be defined as one's attempts to faithfully and effectively understand and communicate the Gospel of God's salvific events. This presupposes the reflective study of both the Word of God and of the active response to human situations as discerned in the lives of individuals and society in general.



My thought has been influenced by the work of Juan Luis Segundo. Segundo has seen a circular pattern evolving in his attempts at taking a practical theological approach to the social experience of oppression, and dialoguing this with his understanding of the Gospel call for the liberation and uplifting of all human life. He has called this continuing process of dialogue between action and reflection the "hermeneutic circle," which he defined as:

. . . the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal. 'Hermeneutic' means 'having to do with interpretation.' And the circular nature of this interpretation stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality according, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The following is an outline and illustration of Segundo's hermeneutic circle (based upon material from pp. 9-18 of the book The Liberation of Theology).

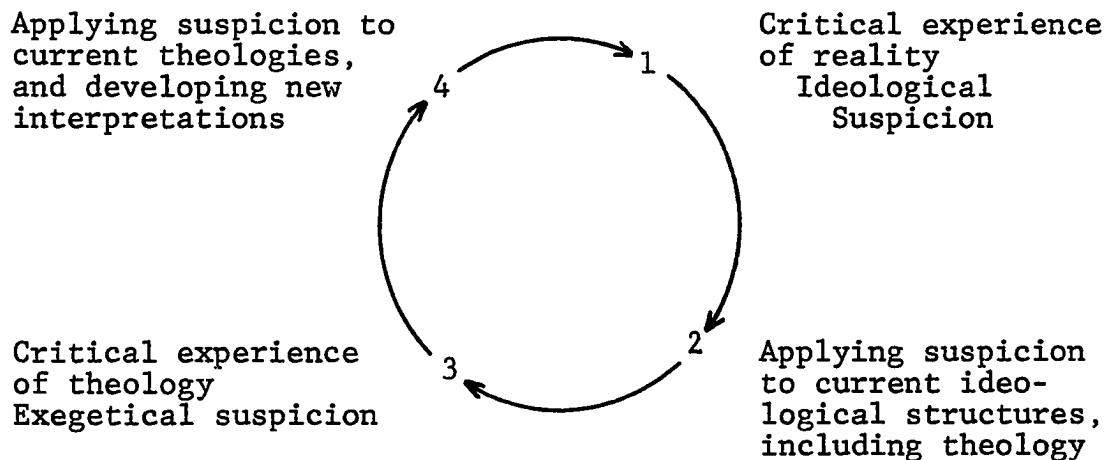
1. A critical experiencing and evaluating of reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion.
2. Applying our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general, and to theology in particular.
3. A critical and new experiencing and evaluating theological reality, which leads us to exegetical suspicion (the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account).

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<sup>5</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology (New York: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 8.

4. Developing our new hermeneutic, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith with the new elements at our disposal. This new way of interpreting causes us to change and experience reality accordingly, which returns us to 1.

#### THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE



An aspect of this hermeneutic circle which is a unique contribution by Segundo is the concept of suspicion. Segundo calls for the theologian to be suspicious of all prevailing concepts and practices; both on a ideological level, in analyzing contemporary social structures and practices, and on a theological level, in analyzing, prevailing theological interpretations and faith communications. By remaining open to intellectual suspicion the preacher-theologian can bring fresh and creative insights to the theological task in general and to preaching in particular. Accepted social customs can be fully examined in order to discover their various theological meanings. Age-old church

traditions and theological statements can be openly tested as to the authenticity of their witness to the Gospel.

For me, theology in general and preaching in particular are the continual dialogue between the social arena of actions and traditions and the reflective arena of understanding and communicating the essential messages of the Gospel as found in the Word of God. It is necessary to carry out the dual functions of the traditionary process as described above, to attempt to remain faithful to the authentic story of God's activity, and at the same time to tell - act out - this story in meaningful terms for the current society.

For ministry in any part of the world, but especially in Latin America, the implications of this approach are valuable. Our pastoral action should come under suspicion and critical examination, particularly in the Latin American context, where much pastoral work is actually helping the "oppressors" to hold onto their power.

It is important, then, for the preacher in Latin America to stand out against compliancy in theological integrity preconceived ideas in biblical interpretation, and conventionality in social practices. Only in this way can the minister, particularly in Latin America remain open to needed changes, challenges, and reinterpretations. Only in this way can the ministry of preaching carry on the rich and continuous dialogue needed between action and reflection,

so that there might always be a new attempt to become ever more faithful to the witness of the Gospel, and to become ever more able in effectively communicating this witness to an ever-changing world.

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